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# Construction Materials

## The Potential of Advanced Textiles For Fabric Formwork

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<b>Abstract:</b>	<p>This paper discusses the development of fabric formwork from a textile perspective, where the adoption of more sophisticated textile construction proposes the manufacture of new types of flexible and embedded fabric formworks for potential use in the construction Industry. These include fibre systems for reinforcing building components, containment structures arranged with open cavities to accept in-fill and layered geo-textiles. In-filled with concrete, aggregate or earth, tailored performance characteristics built-into the textile design can enhance the overall properties of formwork elements. The developments provide key pointers for the progression of the discipline and automation of the process.</p> <p>The cross-discipline group funded under the EPSRC LimesNet International Research Mission 'Structural Woven Formwork' enabled the authors to investigate textiles specifically for use in construction formwork and reinforcement. Collectively, they identified a range of established textile reinforcements of interest, including lightweight woven fabrics, plant fibre materials, mattress fabrics and geo-grid retention structures. Textiles needed to respond to requirements for material efficiency, improved integrity, and contribute to reducing environmental impact.</p> <p>This research proposes new flexible formwork concepts including layered fabrics, designed with anisotropic properties providing enhanced structural performance, permeability and surface finish in comparison to properties found in commercial off-the-shelf fabrics. The proposal introduces dual-function fabrics that provide both permanent formwork and internal reinforcement, where the outer fabric skin is interlinked or stitched with an internal system of textile reinforcement. Described as permanently participating, these structural formworks comprise robust internal woven reinforcement and cavity systems to enhance strength. Matched with specific formwork casting and construction methods, these structures propose to enhance and progress the scope, scale and performance of current formwork, or enable new structures that are difficult to achieve presently.</p>
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## **The Potential of Advanced Textiles for Fabric Formwork**

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### **Summary**

*This paper discusses the development of fabric formwork from a textile perspective, where the adoption of more sophisticated textile construction proposes the manufacture of new types of flexible and embedded fabric formworks for potential use in the construction Industry. These include fibre systems for reinforcing building components, containment structures arranged with open cavities to accept in-fill and layered geo-textiles. In-filled with concrete, aggregate or earth, tailored performance characteristics built-into the textile design can enhance the overall properties of formwork elements. The developments provide key pointers for the progression of the discipline and automation of the process.*

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*This research proposes new flexible formwork concepts including layered fabrics, designed with anisotropic properties providing enhanced structural performance, permeability and surface finish in comparison to properties found in commercial off-the-shelf fabrics. The proposal introduces dual-function fabrics that provide both permanent formwork and internal reinforcement, where the outer fabric skin is interlinked or stitched with an internal system of textile reinforcement. Described as permanently participating, these structural formworks comprise robust internal woven reinforcement and cavity systems to enhance strength. Matched with specific formwork casting and construction methods, these structures propose to enhance and progress the scope, scale and performance of current formwork, or enable new structures that are difficult to achieve presently.*

Notations:

EPSRC – Engineering Physical Sciences Research Council

CAST – Centre for Architectural Structures and Technology, University of Manitoba, Canada

G/m<sup>2</sup> – weight per square metre of the textile material

Keywords: Fabric Formwork, Woven Geotextiles, Structural Frameworks

## 1. Introduction

Concrete is one of the most widely used materials in the world. Cement the active ingredient is a global commodity with annual production in 2011 of 3.6 billion tonnes (see <http://www.cembureau.eu/about-cement/key-facts-figures>). Production of cement is energy intensive and is the major contributor to the carbon footprint of concrete. Locally sourced materials combined with the readily available supply of cement means that concrete can be made with relative little capital equipment and tools. The final ingredient in the production of concrete is the formwork, used to define the shape of the wet concrete as it is cast. The formwork is critical in determining the quality, finish and efficiency of the process. Traditionally formwork has been made using timber and plywood that can be easily shaped by carpenters and hence the quality relies largely on the experience and skill of that individual. Perhaps more significantly, although concrete has been described as ‘liquid stone’ implying limitless shape, the actual geometry of the cast forms are dictated by the materials used for the formwork, namely planar timber, leading to the predominance of rectangular, orthogonal, prismatic elements such as beams and columns. This simplification of the geometry for reasons to avoid complexity in the formwork leads to structural elements and components that are not optimised and indeed are structurally inefficient and add additional dead weight. A major change to the use of rigid planar formworks is to use flexible formworks produced by cutting and shaping textiles. In recent years there have been a growing number of researchers and practitioners using flexible formworks. A short history of the use flexible formworks is given by Veenendaal et al (2011) and Abdelgader et al (2008). There are many benefits with use of flexible textile formworks compared to rigid formwork, see Chandler and Pedreschi (2008), most notably:

- Lighter and easier to construct formwork
- More complex geometries that can lead to much more structurally efficient elements
- Improved concrete finish - the permeable nature of textiles reduce surface defects and produces a harder more durable surface, see Malone (1999) and Orr et al (2012)
- A wide variety of new and exciting architectural forms and finishes, Pedreschi (2011)

Lee (2011) developed an efficient form-active concrete beam, whose geometry responded to the applied bending and shear forces, that resulted in a significant reduction in both the concrete and steel compared to an equivalent rectangular beam. The embodied carbon reduced by over 30%. West (2006) and Hasheman (2012) also report resultant savings on efficient forms (Figure 1). Orr et al (2012) reports on the optimisation of double T beams using fabric formwork.

## 2. Current formwork textiles

To date almost all the textiles used for fabric formwork have been developed for other uses, such as apparel, screening and most notably geotextiles. In architectural application the

texture and pattern of fabric is used to create many different types of surface aesthetic effects. Surface texture and finish of formwork panels is mainly determined by the fibre and yarn type. Pedreschi (2011) has conducted substantial trials using a variety of commercially available fabrics, seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Early research identified the key characteristics of a standard range of commercial textiles, assessing their behaviour with in-fill materials and their suitability for formwork. Here 'standard' refers to a conventional industrial woven textile, economically produced in high volumes, compatible with textile production and finishing machinery and constructed using plain or twill weave construction. As seen in progressive formwork concepts by West (2006) and Pedreschi (2011), building components such as columns, beams, vaults, panel products, composites, sub-ground reinforcement, geo-textiles and architectural panels were studied as exemplars of good practice. Creative and engineered performance forces amalgamated to produce unique and efficient structural elements. Through this work, form-finding, expressive and spontaneous forms have demonstrated the creative potential of the process.

The variety of textile constructions produces a range of permeability and porosity variations thus affecting the quality and strength of the concrete, which in turn alters the resulting surface quality of formed concrete. The ideal characteristics of formwork textiles are as follows:

- High tensile strength and stiffness
- Controlled permeability and porosity
- Resistance to tearing and bursting and low surface adhesion to the concrete
- Low creep modulus

Each of these is discussed further below.

## **2.1 High tensile strength and stiffness**

The tensile strength and stiffness of the fabric required will depend on the application (the geometry, degree of restraint and pre-stress in the fabric) and the pressure generated by the wet concrete. Although successful constructions have been made using relatively low strength and stiffness textiles, such as woven cottons, if the application requires significant geometric control, comparatively stiff fabrics, such as polypropylene geotextiles, have been shown to be very effective. Polypropylene geotextiles have the added advantage that the material itself is not sensitive to water, which may cause other materials to stretch. Commercial off-the shelf bi-axial woven geo-textiles with an areal density range of  $200\text{g/m}^2$  –  $500\text{g/m}^2$  are most suitable. Fabrics are constructed from plain weave, the most basic of interlacement constructions with good dimensional stability between warp (X) and weft (Y) axes, offering high tensile strength and isotropic behaviour. Laminated with a non-slip, anti-climatic erosion coating, woven polypropylenes have particularly useful qualities in terms of high tensile strength, permeability, a low creep modulus, resistance to tear and are easily stripped. Plain weave cotton calico, used as a textile industry staple produces highly successful formworks with matt, even surfaces with limited interlacement indentation.

## **2.2 Controlled permeability and porosity**

Permeability and aperture size between the interlacing fibres within the fabric structure determines the quality of surface finish and strength of the surface layers of the concrete. The ideal permeability of textile will allow the passage of water but restrict the flow of cement paste. This will result in the outer surface layers of concrete having a dense cement-rich

content that reduces visible defects and increases durability. In terms of fibre porosity, to improve the quality of finished concrete, fibres that have the ability to transport or 'wick' moisture to the outside of the formwork can encourage accelerated drying, better quality curing and good surface quality.

Textiles, such as spacer fabrics or pile woven fabrics, have been used for formworks, most notably by Pronk (2002), and for inflatable concrete shelters such as concrete canvas (see <http://concretecanvas.com>). 2.5D spacer fabrics have 2 woven surfaces interconnected via pile threads with no accompanying transverse 'weft' threads, producing a fabric with uniform surfaces and a typical depth of 1cm (but up to 10cm). Primarily designed for the healthcare and leisure industries, these structures lack permeability and contain a high density of interconnecting threads running between faces which can cause obstructions to the flow of the in-fill. Therefore, they are not recommended for structures, dependent on size and geometry, where pour length is more critical. Figure 4 shows a curved shell concept cast at the University of Edinburgh where the pour length increased corresponding to the diameter of the conical structure. In-fill technique is critical to prevent air pockets or surface defects.

### **2.3 Resistance to tearing and bursting and low surface adhesion to the concrete**

Good fabric integrity, interlocking strength between fibres, low friction coating and puncture resistance provides fabric with good tear resistance. Coatings applied to synthetic textiles during finishing can help provide ideal fabric for formwork. Fabrics with the highest levels of drape (a collapsible and fluid fabric, often with high sheen that shears easily) are not recommended for structural components as they lack the structural strength and rigidity required. These fabrics are suited for the moulding of decorative fascias. Fabrics with higher stiffness are effective in maintaining streamlined contours in beams and column structures but can be difficult to manipulate under tension at component edges.

Low friction polymer coatings and PVC applied to fabric or yarns during the textile finishing process enable easy release of sacrificial formwork material, producing highly polished surfaces. Continuous or spun glass fibre (non-texturised), viscose rayon and most synthetic technical textiles provide good materials that release well.

Non-woven and dry-laid fabrics have poor structural integrity due to their randomly entangled construction and are found to adhere to the concrete, disintegrating on release; unless highly compressed, felted or bonded with another material (West, Araya 2009). The surface texture and discontinuous fibre lengths of flax and jute fabrics also adhere to the concrete providing poor release and can tear the fabric, unless blended with a synthetic fibre.

### **2.4 Low creep modulus**

Some fabrics continue to stretch after the concrete has been placed and this can lead to variations in the geometry. The fabric may not recover after stripping, making subsequent re-use impractical. Control over the geometry of the component with minimal deformation is crucial. Woven textiles are preferred over knitted constructions for this reason. Some natural fibres stretch whilst damp under sustained tension resulting in sagging deformations to the component.

In contrast, flexible elastomeric Lycra® material provides unconventional bulged and rounded free-forms. The bulged surfaces, whether intentional or at the will of gravity creates aesthetic

effects. Using gravity and natural weight intentionally to cause 'bowed' curvatures has been attempted by some formwork fabricators (Chandler and Pedreschi 2008).

### **3. Future Formwork Textiles**

Most formwork research has been undertaken by architects and engineers concentrating on the forms and finishes imparted to the concrete. There has been very little research on the textiles employed. This group has used the collaboration as a catalyst to understand potential advances in formwork construction that can be achieved with the introduction of new textile structures. The ongoing prototype developments were produced in conjunction with industrial manufacturers and on-location at the participating UK Universities. Areas of focus have been to:

1. use textiles with anisotropic characteristics to reduce the volume of concrete for in-fill by streamlining forms to an efficient tailored shape;
2. improve the structural performance and durability of the concrete system by introducing high strength textiles with different permeability, interlacement structure and load-bearing capability in comparison to current textiles;
3. use the textile to minimise the use of timber in the vertical supporting framework (as false work and shuttering) thus reducing reliance on timber resources;
4. use textiles for sacrificial formwork, containment structures and as reinforcement particularly in complex curved geometry where conventional formwork systems may be difficult to construct;
5. assess the versatility of fabrics for use with alternative in-fills such as aggregate, earth and hemp-lime;
6. consider the manufacturing capability of textile and concrete fabricators in UK and Europe to produce said materials.

New woven formwork structures such as multiple layer geo-grids and near-net shaped reinforcements are designed with tailored anisotropic properties to provide alternative performance, permeability behaviour and surface finish. These possess different levels of in-fill retention and containment, porosity and conformability within a given area of the fabric. This enables reinforcement and their subsequent mechanical properties to be manifested where required.

Single layer fabrics can be extended to include double, triple and multiple layer (3D) structures. The fibre proportion and construction density of yarns within and between fabric layers can be varied. Increasing or decreasing aperture sizes within and between the Warp (X) and Weft (Y) axes of the fabric can provide solid or spaced structures with different reinforcement properties. These include double layer interwoven tensile grids and experimental fabrics possessing an intermediate system of yarns connecting surfaces (see Figures 5 & 6).

Tailoring properties, such as increasing the areal density and fibre proportion in a specific zone of the fabric can offer resistance to localised loading, high pressure or heavy wear. Woven geo-textiles (Stewart 2010) demonstrated how small yet effective variations to weave structure grid size can have considerable effect on textile properties (and subsequent wear resistance). Grid aperture size can provide containment as well as filtration capability if



different concrete aggregate grades are used (Figure 7). Three-dimensional woven containment grids are also an exciting development (Figure 8). These structures are currently being evaluated, for volume production, by an industrial manufacturer.

Free-standing woven cavity constructions can be produced to minimise the reliance on timber frameworks. The outer fabric layers (skin) are connected with an internal system of textile layers achieved by 2D and 3D weave and stitch technologies in such a way as to produce robust free-standing textile systems with multiple internal cavities to receive in-fill (Soden et al 2012). The constructions offer improved structural performance and permanent formwork reinforcement with specific 'load' zones by designing a robust multiple cavity construction, assembled in such a way as to enhance the compressive strength of the system (see Figures 9 & 10). They could resist against high tension forces and the hydrostatic pressure of concrete during casting and could also provide increased resistance to uneven in-fill settling. These are suitable for vertical wall and column elements. Developing textiles specifically for formwork in combination with standard off-the shelf reinforcement could provide exciting new stitched formwork configurations.

Formwork textile structures described in this paper are distinguishable from fibre reinforced composite textiles due to the fabric's ability to perform dual functionality as both reinforcement and surface formwork mould simultaneously. It is not required to be completely embedded by the matrix. However, it is often coated with a chemical agent, bitumen or polymer to guard against degradation. The fabric design needs to consider controlled wicking of moisture and its capability to readily host renders such as hemp-lime and antifungal treatments.

Infiltrating the domains of fibre reinforced concrete, 3D reinforced, axial and multiple layer textile systems are dominant in engineering composite, reinforced concrete (Brameshuber 2006) and narrow fabric weaving sectors. Fabric 'preforms' are designed with controlled axial proportions often in fibre volume densities of over 45%, to enable bespoke net-shaping, high stiffness and strength. Such 3D textile systems are described in the built environment as 'permanently participating' fabric formwork. The ability to produce a permanent participating formwork beam has been explained by Orr et al (2011) where:

"A participating fabric system in which a composite fabric incorporating carbon fibres acts as both formwork and reinforcement may therefore be advantageous in some situations. Improvements in 3D weaving capabilities may allow designers to specify carbon fibre weave directions and densities at various points along the length of a beam based on the applied loads. The resulting formwork could then simply be filled with concrete to provide an optimised composite reinforced structure"

Examples of 3D weaves are shown in Figures 11 & 12 (Soden 2009).

#### **4. Opportunities**

Woven textiles using polyester, polyethylene, polypropylene and synthetic fibres currently serve a variety of applications in the civil and infrastructural engineering Industry. The weave manufacturer's wide-width availability, produced in mass volumes at the highest production speeds with narrow overheads makes them attractive to contractors who are keen to maintain traditional materials in a slow-changing conservative industry. With new materials, textile experts ascertain how to best assign production machinery to manufacture new

materials whilst seamlessly integrating with the established production schedule. They also consider how different structures can be obtained with limited modification to the manufacturing set-up to yield high production rates with limited down-time thus maximising production efficiencies. These new formworks offer the opportunity for industrial manufacturers to expand their portfolio to include new textile products.

Formwork provides other cost and time-saving advantages by producing finished cast surfaces without the requirement for additional cosmetic fascias. Surface texture and finish is important in the development of new contemporary building materials, particularly for designers and architects. Introducing bespoke surface finishes in conventional rigid formwork systems can involve additional, highly specialised (and costly) operations to the formwork, such as the use of latex form liners and post hardened tooling. Both the geometry and surface are integral to textile formwork systems.

The use of fabric as formwork for doubly curved shells could take great advantage of the great inherent strength of shells and their comparative lightness (Cauberg 2012). Concrete shells were used extensively in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century but became used less as the complexity of the formwork required using rigid materials became increasing more costly Tang (2012). Fabric formwork can produce similarly efficient shapes with much greater ease (see Figure 13). 3D woven textiles offer the opportunity to fully optimise the construction of a new generation of concrete shells by the use of multiple layers incorporating a layer to control the surface finish and layers to provide embedded reinforcement that follows the natural curvatures of the component.

Geo-textiles and geo-composites suffer from elongation, buckling and rupture when stressed in buried containment infrastructure (Brachman 2010). To compensate for poor performance, additional aggregate has to be in-filled with substantial additional cost resulting in reduced volume capacity. An improved design of buried geo-composite containment fabric such as geo-grids and layered grids described earlier could potentially alleviate this problem.

The robust formworks with internal cavities can provide a predominantly free-standing solution due to their inherent fabric stiffness and stability with minimal support from guide handles. Particularly in a vertical direction, this eliminates the reliance on substantial plywood timber frameworks, where the demands for depth and stiffness require timber to be used in large quantities to prevent deflection.

Timber quality, supply and distribution is problematic in the developing world, and in rebuilding after natural disasters, a formwork construction wall system that does not rely solely on timber nor require specialist construction experience such as the one described here, is of interest. Providing a versatile 'one-stop' solution, it is easily transportable to inhospitable terrain, and is particularly suited for economies where natural disaster has eliminated all vegetation. It is anticipated that the formwork is available on a portable roll (to scale), erected (vertically) on site and suited for earth and even mixed rubble in-fill. It can be rendered using vernacular techniques thus fitting local preferences. The system will combine with other provided materials to form the whole dwelling. The practical work on prototype fabric formwork structures has also shown that it is inherently simpler than conventional rigid formwork and can be learned relatively easily by unskilled workers.

The modular design of the formwork enables the system to be designed to suit the particular climate conditions. The textile can incorporate constructions with appropriate aperture sizes and fibres with advanced moisture management capabilities and or coatings. These permit

moisture transportation and controlled wicking of water from the in-fill allowing accelerated drying and yielding an overall improved strength of mixture (if concrete) and subsequent quality of the in-fill. This could offer benefits in damp climates prone to flooding where drying and curing is difficult. Conversely the fabric can be used to maintain a water moisture level where slower rates of curing are needed. The system is basic enough to be easily understood and used by semi or unskilled workers with appropriate guidance and training.

## **5. Challenges**

The paper has described research using textile design to advance future formwork concepts and realise new exciting applications. These ambitions come with challenges that have to be considered including:

- The question of up-scaling from textile prototype to full production is challenging for the textile manufacturer when attempting to introduce new systems and products. The balance between standardised and bespoke production and matching production volumes to construction project needs will be a major practical consideration.
- The additional performance versus additional cost: Both stitched and fully woven elements have been considered relevant for this investigation providing both economical and more costly tailored solutions. More rapid uptake of the lower tech materials is expected as they offer less of a 'technology jump' to current product and can be manufactured readily using current set-ups in both UK and Asia.
- New technology formworks can be described as a disruptive technology; Christensen (1997) is one that challenges the original paradigm, in this case rigid formwork. Such technologies often supplant existing technologies that originate from 'niche' applications.
- It will be necessary to demonstrate to architects and contractors that these technologies present a new approach relying on textile technology rather than the resurrection of an older construction technology.

The anticipated applications for formwork textiles will most likely consist of a series of different and quite distinct sectors:

- Standardised systems for the economic production of structural elements such as beams, columns and walls.
- Highly bespoke structural elements for exclusive applications.
- Low technology systems for rapid deployment and self build in post disaster re-construction.
- Architectural finishes and façade systems.

The technology readiness level of some of the proposed formwork types is still in commercial infancy (bespoke vaulted structures), whilst others are nearing (low tech disaster systems) or have already reached commercial readiness (facades and panels).

## **6. Conclusion**

There is now sufficient research in the use and application of flexible formworks with textiles to prove the effectiveness of the concept. However it is not a panacea for all the potential applications of concrete. What is clear that once the key characteristics of the evolving technology are understood then there are considerable benefits and merits in comparison

with traditional rigid formworks. To date most of the research has concentrated on the vicarious use of textiles developed for other applications. This paper has sought to demonstrate that, taken from the viewpoint of the textile technologist and considering the development of textiles specific to concrete, the range and effectiveness of the technology can expand much further.

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Figure 1 CAST Centre prototypes  
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Figure 11: 3D tapered woven preform  
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Figure 12: 3D woven X-profile  
[Click here to download high resolution image](#)

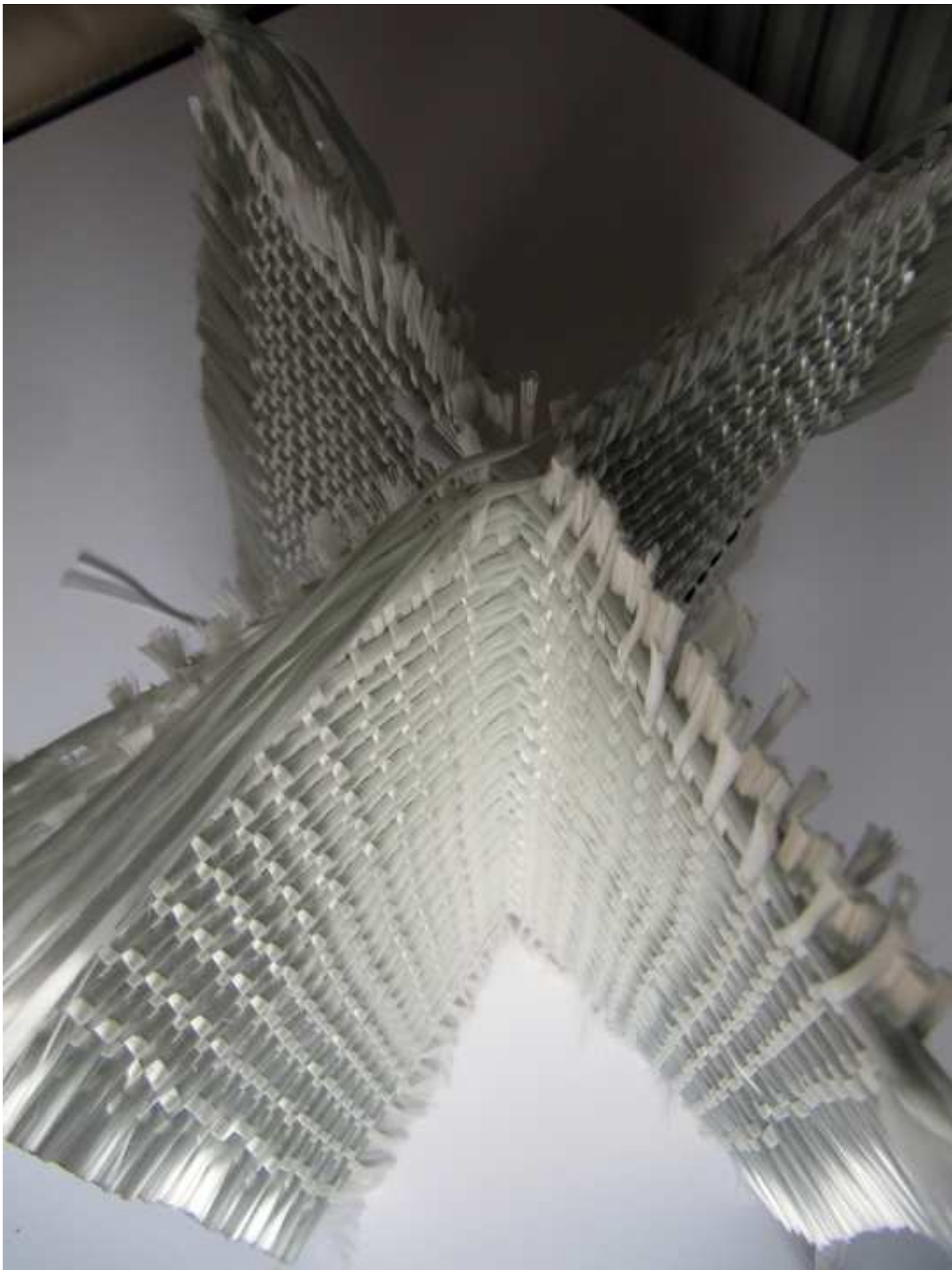




Figure 13: Edinburgh's curved shell experiments  
[Click here to download high resolution image](#)



Double Curved Furnicular Shell



# Memo

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To: Construction Materials Journal

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From: Dr Julie Brennan

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Date: 13 May 2013

Ref:

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Dear Construction Materials journal,

Authors have responded to reviewer comments positively and concentrated on issues they raised specifically. The future formwork section in particular has been revised and all authors have contributed to the changes.

The paper is much improved, is a true reflection and references have been checked.

I ask that reviewers appreciate that this is a new cross-discipline collaboration and with such contrasting backgrounds, the writing will reflect those specialisms. Unlike most authored collaborations, we had not worked together before. The paper is original work and is in keeping with the principles of the Limesnet network where a focus was placed upon engaging experts from different disciplines. It may be unusual, but is the actual result from one of those exchanges.

All Figures are the authors or co-authors own photographs

Signed copyright forms will be sent individually for speed.

This has been a challenge for me as a textile lead author and I do appreciate this opportunity to publish in your journal. I hope it raises interest in textile materials for construction and leads to further research in the area.

Thank you.

With kind regards

Dr Julie Brennan



Dr Julie Brennan (nee Soden)  
Reader Constructed Textiles  
University of Ulster, Belfast  
York Street  
Belfast  
BT15 1ED

13<sup>th</sup> May, 2013

Dear Construction Materials journal,

Please find the second revision to the paper entitled 'The Potential of Advanced Textiles for Fabric Formwork' – a paper submitted for the Limesnet themed issue describing the research conducted for our cross-discipline collaboration.

I trust this will be a further improvement and look forward to seeing it in print. It has been a challenge and a privilege to come from the textiles discipline to engage with such experts to generate new work and to effectively communicate in such contrasting yet compatible disciplines.

I hope the paper generates further regard for textiles as a key material and driver for new concepts and enhancements in the construction industry.

Thank you.

With kind regards

Dr Julie Brennan